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Lindberg, Susanna

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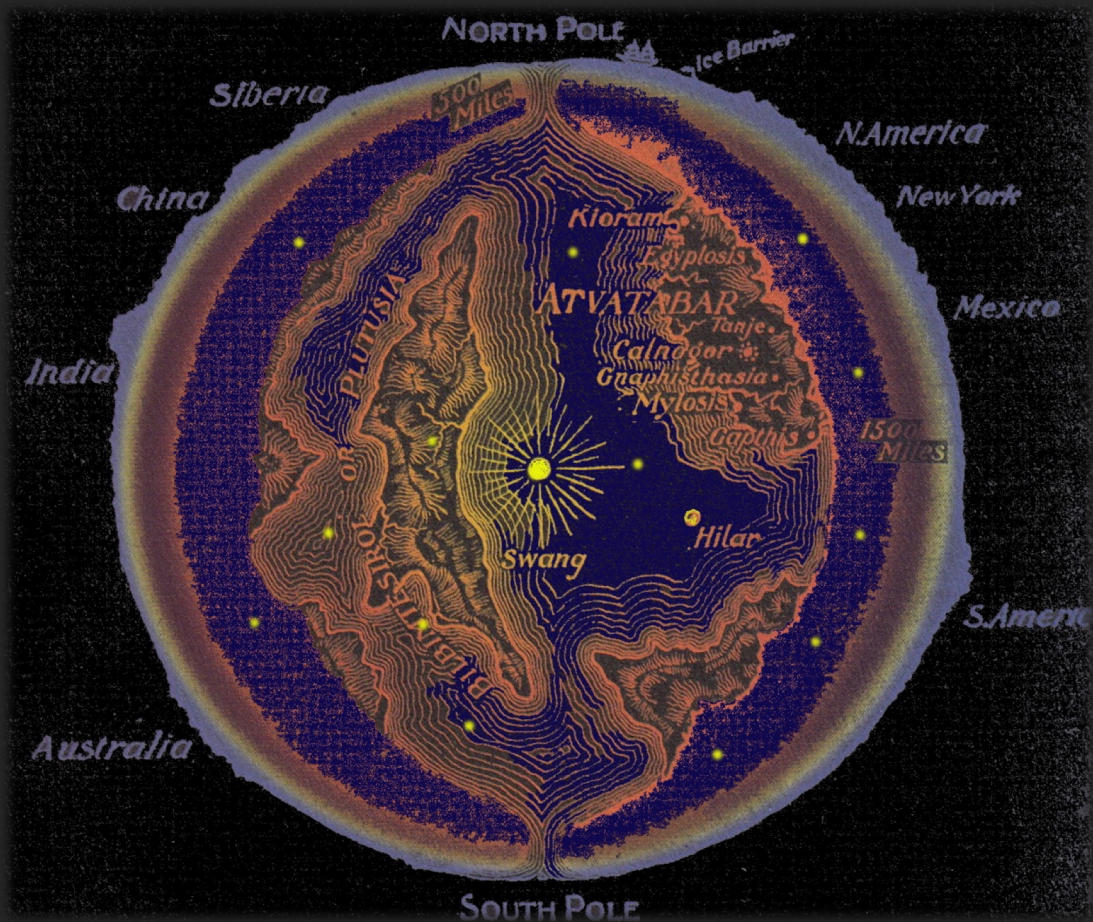
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UNTHINKING THE UNDERWORLD

NATURE, DEATH, AND THE ELEMENTAL



SUSANNA LINDBERG

The world is what carries and holds

our lives together. It is what we think about every day.

The underworld is the unfathomable abyss beyond the world, upon which the world seems to float. It cannot be thought, but sometimes we can feel it enveloping the world like the night surrounds the day. (Do not get me wrong - the underworld does not “really” exist, it is not another world next to this one. Rather it is an *image* of the imperative to inquire into the abstract grounds of the world; just as the *earth* in Hölderlin and Rilke is the image of the reverse side of the world.)

Being the nocturnal unground of the world, the underworld cannot be explained by everyday concepts. In order to sound it, one needs to enact a kind of *epoché*, or unthink one's ordinary world thoughts. This process elaborates unthinking into a different kind of skill. One thinks the underworld firstly by *unthinking* the world, and ultimately by *unthinking* the underworld itself.

But what does unthinking the world mean? In order to grasp such awkward detours, further detours are needed.

Our world cannot be taken for granted; questioning the given world leads to unthinking it. The underworld is the correlate of such unthinking. Following the ways of unthinking is easier with a precise image of the underworld.

We will now take two detours: the first of which shows how an interpretation of the world in terms of ecology reveals an underworld of a wilder nature, and the second of which shows how an interpretation of the world in terms of human life reveals the underworld of death. These two images of the

underworld should prepare its philosophical interpretation in terms of the elemental.

The natural unground of ecology

First detour: why would the world of ecology be conditioned by the underworld of nature?

Literally the *logos* of the *oikos*, ecology tends to project a *closed* world even when it does not aim at closure. In its beginning, ecology thought the world as organisms' relation to their environment (Haeckel, Uexküll) and then as a system of relations and interactions between inorganic and organic elements of an environment. Gradually, not only natural but also psychological and social situations were articulated in terms of ecologies (Guattari), and today it makes sense to think the world as a whole in terms of a general ecology that also includes technology (Hörl). It also makes sense to think politics in terms of an ecology of human life, nonhuman life and things (Bennett). Does the generalization of ecology make the ancient term of nature obsolete, so that the contemporary world is an ecology without nature (Morton)? Or is nature the name of whatever breaks the fluid functioning of an anthropo-techno-bio-logical ecosystem (Neyrat, Toadvine)?

Ecology is certainly a rich idea. Whatever beings are included in an ecology, it is a living system or environment. An environment is not a given *place*; it is the system of *relations* between organisms and other things. These relations reside in the *activities* through which organisms modify their environment and are themselves modified. Life is plasticity and metamorphosis, and this is why every ecological situation is a *changing* one (and ecological action cannot be reduced to conservation). Today, we quite obviously understand our world as an ecological system, and the term ecology also invites us

to ask how to *care* about the common world. It is a difficult task that demands much more than ordinary politics, but still it follows the logic of “worldly” thinking. Ecology is difficult because it relates so many incommensurate things to one another: different human beings, animals and plants, but also atmospheric systems, technological networks, social and economic organizations, and so on. Political ecology is even more difficult because it does not only explain such relations but aims at *managing* them. The central question of political ecology is to decide whether this management should amount to *regulating* these relations or to *negotiating* them.

If attending to ecology means *regulating* the relations between different kinds of beings, ecology is above all the responsibility of specialists who try to understand the objectively best way of harmonizing the different elements of an ecosystem. But if caring for ecology means *negotiating* these relations, it is a democratic project. Many accept that it is necessary to negotiate ecological justice between, for example, the Global South and the Global North. But it is less evident that ecological negotiations could also take place, say, between human beings, cows, prions and pharmaceuticals.

Although an ecological situation is a changing one, constantly engaged in exchanges with external influences, it nonetheless tends towards a relative internal balance which defines it as a closure: it is a world. Now, if irruptions of unexpected external events come to destroy this balance, they jeopardize the internal harmony that keeps the ecosystem together. Because external events cause imbalance, they are generally perceived as catastrophes. Ecocatastrophes may appear to have natural causes (hurricanes, earthquakes) or technological ones (nuclear or information technological disasters). But on closer inspection none of them is simply natural or simply technological, for in the last instance they can all be explained in terms of general techno-ecology (as

Jean-Luc Nancy argued in relation to the Fukushima nuclear accident). From the perspective inside of an ecosystem the catastrophe arrives unexpectedly and incomprehensibly, so that it is not encountered knowingly but only *affectively* (with fear, terror, panic – or joy?) What characterizes it fundamentally is its mode of appearing, which is that of an unexpected *event*, and its mode of being, which is that of *contingency*, for it cannot fit into the *logos* of the ecological system but appears senseless, inexplicable and unjustifiable to it. Let us interpret this as an irruption of *nature*: in this interpretation, nature means something that cannot be assimilated to the world, that *undoes* the world, that is *unworldly*, *entweltlich*, as Heidegger once said. Seen in this way, nature is not a particular kind of being but a certain *mode* of irruption of uncontrollable elements that overwhelm the ordered world. A natural catastrophe can fall upon an ecological situation from the outside like a comet. But even a comet does not come from an absolute outside: it comes from a wider, wilder nature that the living system simply does not perceive. In many ways, the outside is already inside the ecological situation, manifested in the impossibility of assimilating existents entirely to the world system, and sometimes in their resistance to it. The best example of this is the human being, whose “nature” seems to be to turn against the very (eco)system in which s/he lives. Understood in this way, nature is the *event* that interrupts the smooth functioning of an ecology, not an event of truth (like religious events) but on the contrary the irruption of a contingent disturbance that suddenly becomes destinal.

Ecological praxis must answer to such unexpected catastrophes. But also in the absence of striking events, ecological praxis must relate to alien, exterior nature. All practical thinking needs to justify itself by an idea of what the world *is* that the praxis arranges in the first place. This

thinking relies on anthropological, biological, technological and other kinds of knowledge, and knowledge for its part relies on something that could be called its ontological presuppositions. The latter consists in the *questions* from which thinking proceeds, in the non-political grounds of political thinking and in the non-scientific grounds of scientific thinking that do not *ground* the world but *un-ground* it, thus showing the inexplicable abyss under the world. The unground of the world cannot be thought in the same way as its ground. “Nature” is now the name of the unground of the world. Never mind if “nature” appears as concrete catastrophes that destroy ecosystems, or as theoretical questions that destroy systems of thought. Nature can be a physical reality or a biological one, an aesthetic or a sensual experience, or the thunderous experience of encountering Rilke's angel and beast. Thinking nature as a ground and an unground does not amount to deciding *what* it is, but to asking *how* it presents itself to us, inquiring into its specific *modes* of appearing as a ground that is simultaneously an unground. In asking how nature is given to us, we do not inquire into our own perception of it but into the ways in which it shows itself - sometimes dimly, sometimes dazzlingly, and always incommensurable with our capacity for apprehending it. From this point of view, nature is not an object, nor even matter, but the dimension of the elemental. Invisible, inaudible, unthinkable, it *is*, but it is not *something*; it carries and envelops but does not ground.

Below, this nature that is “older” than thought will be called *elemental nature*. Then we will inquire into the *elemental thinking* that tries to think it, and show why elemental thinking requires a specific kind of *unthinking*.

Images of the netherworld

How to approach elemental nature? How to think about it? Let us approach the task of thinking the sense of elemental thinking through another detour. This detour leads from the world of the living to the underworld of the dead. It unthinks philosophy by giving in to the *fascination of images*. The easiest images are so old that they feel like common myths. Being widely shared does not turn images into myths to be believed, but nonetheless they focalize attention simply and articulate ideas and perceptions.

The first image is Plato's allegory of the cave in which ordinary people live chained. They can only see the shadows and ghosts of reality projected on the back wall by the demoniac puppeteers who operate the cave-cinema, until one of the chained people manages to break free and emerge into the sun of reality. Plato's image is so familiar that it is easy to subvert it. What if our world was not the cave anymore, but the overground world bathing in the bright sunlight of reason and science? We stand in the sun and see everything that the sun illuminates. There's only one thing that we do not see, namely the ground under our feet that the sun of normal science cannot penetrate, but that seems to call for a kind of a psychoanalysis of the elemental ground (like Bachelard's psychoanalysis of fire). In order to know where we are standing, we should get underground and descend back to the cave - but we do not know how to do it anymore. Light-bearer Plato himself said that getting back to the cave is as difficult as getting out of it, as each passage imposes a conversion that painfully wrings the soul inside out. Where is the opening of the cave? How to descend into it, knowing that the passage is pitch black, winding, rocky and stony? If ever we found our way down into the cavern and if ever the legendary prisoners and puppeteers were still there, playing their strange and cruel game, how could we make sense

of what is going on, and how could we communicate with the livid protagonists of the shadow play? Most probably our eyes could not see, our ears could not hear, our minds could not understand the subterranean shadow images and echoing words.

Confused by the moving shadows, we could try out echoing out in order to evaluate the space of the cave. But neither seeing nor sounding penetrates further than that. We cannot penetrate into the very earth that holds the cave, we cannot penetrate into the very rock of which the cavern is but a reluctant withdrawal. The inside of the rock is its very materiality, what the eyes cannot see because it obscures visibility, what the ears cannot hear because it dampens sound, what the mind cannot figure because it is too dense to allow figuration.

The second image of the underworld comes from my pre-Christian ancestors who saw the underworld as the world of the dead. They thought that after the overground life, the dead go on living in the underground world with its own underground suns and moons and forests and waterways. Maybe the dead were quite similar to what they were in the world of the living, maybe they were more evasive and shadowlike, maybe they turned gradually into strange-looking earth sprites, gnomes and trolls (before monotheism these were not dim-witted monsters). The frontier between the world and the underworld was never really watertight, so the ghosts could see the living and the living could see the ghosts - although the difference between their senses and their tongues made communication difficult. This is why shamans sought ways to dim daily consciousness in a trance, allowing them to go under and speak with the dead. The dead seemed to live in another time, for they could tell the shamans about the past and future.

Of course, one does not need Fenno-Ugrian ancestry to seek communication with the netherworld, for one finds similar conceptions of life and death throughout the mythologies of the

world, for example in Kenya; and in descriptions of shamanistic travels to the world of the dead in the writing of Homer, Virgil and Dante. Today, communing with the dead is not a religion but only an image. But it is a useful image of the way our thoughts are not only haunted by others and by others' thoughts, but also by the thoughts of the dead and by the deads' thoughts in us (Derrida). We could not think without this haunting – but because of the haunting, we never really know who thinks in us when we think. Whatever our coherent everyday world thoughts might be, they are always conditioned by muffled, splintered underworld thoughts of the dead.

The figure of the dead that the shaman-poet encounters in Hades illustrates the difficulty of thinking about the underworld. It is not enough to overcome one's fear of the underworld. In order to penetrate into it one must accept to become other, dare to host another way of thinking, and yet also conserve one's own thoughts, so as to compare the two ways of thinking. Thinking needs these splittings and detours. Passing from one world to another is also a kind of an *epoché*, not the one that reveals the fundamental structure of consciousness (Husserl) but the one that reveals the fundamental structure of the world. While the ordinary world stands for the ordinary temporality of calculable causality, inheritance and probability, the underworld stands for another temporality, the time of incalculable strokes of destiny and unexpected events, that is revealed in the legend.

Thinking the elemental

In these two images, the underworld that contradicts but nonetheless conditions the world was conceived as raw nature behind the functional ecosystem and as death behind human society. These images are meant to illustrate the difficulty of approaching the underworld. In order to fully understand this

difficulty, however, we need to turn towards philosophy, because it specializes in questions of relating and approaching. Let us now ask, at last without detours, how we can think about the underworld. Let us first see how the underworld gives itself to philosophical thought, and after that what kind of (un)thinking corresponds to it.

Of course, “underworld” is not really a philosophical term. Here it is meant to name the reverse side of the phenomenal world that opens towards an ontological interrogation of the world’s being. The term is somewhat misleading because it may evoke the idea of another world below or beside the phenomenal world. But it is not another world, it is not situated within the world nor without it. It is simply the question of the primordial materiality of the phenomenal world.

In ancient philosophy, the materiality of the world has sometimes been approached in terms of the elemental. Elemental materiality does not coincide with the sensible matter that you can touch, nor with the theoretical matter that natural science can explain: it is the abstract materiality of existence. The elemental is a very old philosophical term that originally designated the primordial substances of nature. In Antiquity, it designated either the four elements (water, air, earth, fire) or the simple elementary bodies (atoms, *stoikheia* of language). In early modern science it came to designate the elementary realities like space and time, the elementary tissues of the living or the elementary passions of the soul. Today the term retains no scientific meaning, but it is still used in phenomenology to approach the question of materiality. The phenomenological question of materiality does not point at any construction blocs of reality but only at the abstract question of the conditions of experience, of appearing, and finally of being. For instance, ever since Schelling, “light” is the element of reason (or of thinking) that designates what makes visible without being visible itself and that includes the

sensible and rational conditions of experience. Schelling coupled light with “gravity,” which is the element of being that signifies the inexplicable fact *that there is being*, that later phenomenologists designate with the elementals of the *fysis*, the *flesh*, the *es gibt* or the *il y a*. Blanchot examined the elemental in terms of the *night*, and recently, in another stratum of *Alienocene*, Manchev in terms of the *clouds*. Such names are different detours for making sense of a dimension of being *of* which there is no direct experience but *in* which experience nonetheless happens. Instead of choosing one of the possible poetic names of the elemental, I prefer to call it simply *the elemental*, in order to avoid fixing its nature and in order to point, instead, at the very force of generating ever-new images of the invisible, inaudible, unimaginable fact of being.

What is the elemental materiality of the world?

Firstly, the elemental is *nothing*. It *is*, but it is not a *thing*. It *is* nothing, like being is the being of beings without ever being *there at hands*. It is not a thing but a specific *mode of givenness* of the ground of things: the *withdrawal* of being in beings, the *refusal* of ground in things, the *absence* of reason in reality. The elemental is the absence of transcendental ground (such as God or *causa sui*), an absence which signals that the negation of such a ground does not amount to the empty *nihil* of nihilism but to another way of encountering being.

Secondly, the elemental is therefore not a blunt nothingness but the nothing *of being*. It is a kind of a generous nothingness that is not simply absent but *signals* its own absence: it is not an empty void but a dynamic nothingness that calls and beacons from afar. When the elemental signifies, it moves us with an overwhelming force that carries us away from familiar grounds. Such irruptions push (human) life from its familiar grounds, but they can also draw it towards unheard-of

possibilities. Sometimes, the presence of the elemental can be felt in unexpected singular events that do not fit into the horizon of expectations. In these cases, the absence of the conditions of an event comes to the fore when something occurs that cannot be explained by the laws of the familiar world, but appears *surprising* in regard to known causalities, teleologies and destinies. Unlike the *Ereignis*, such an event is not a destinal event of sense, it is *contingent*. The surprise of the contingent occurrence is precisely the mode of “nature” that contests the established “ecosystem.” Sometimes, on the other hand, the elemental manifests itself as a general atmosphere of the undoing of the world, and not in a particular event. It signals itself within presence as the absence that conditions the presence, and it signals itself within reality as the absence of reason of reality. The nothingness of the world does not mean that there is no world at all but that the world is affected by its own undoing: it *unworlds*.

Although it is actually a category mistake to give concrete examples of such abstract ontological considerations, I will risk an illustration of the loss of ground depicted above. The surge of the elemental makes us loose familiar ground. Earlier we explained the familiar ground as the ecosystem in which we live. In that context, the irruption of the elemental was demonstrated through the irruption of raw nature, especially in the form of natural catastrophe. A singular event that shakes familiar ground could be, for example, the recent realization that the estimates of CO2 development in the atmosphere may have to be radically changed if the melting of Siberian permafrost provokes the release of huge amounts of methane. Obviously, this is surprising only for a while, for as soon as the phenomenon is noticed, specialists start to adjust their picture of global climate to it. This is why the example of Siberian permafrost is so imperfect, but on the other hand, I could not describe a truly surprising event

occurring right now because I would not be aware of it. On a general level, the atmosphere of unworlding cannot be reduced to any particular events because it is an existential tonality. However, maybe one could illustrate the general existential tonality of unworlding through the paralyzing feeling (“climate anguish”) aroused by the thought of the complex and overwhelming processes of climate change and sixth extinction.

Thirdly, because we are attracted towards the elemental but cannot see what it is, we cannot help but *imagine* it. We have already met many of its images: fire, earth, death, night, clouds. Such images do not have the status of elementals if they only reflect individual experiences. Elementals are not perceptions, but abstract ways of articulating the materiality of being. They are images - not images *of* something, but *originary* images that do not refer to an origin but articulate the possibility of sense. It is impossible to tell where such images rise from: it is *as if* they were generated by a productive imagination that disseminates virtual images of the materiality of being. Such an imagination is neither individual nor collective but impersonal and anonymous. Correlatively, images of the elemental are neither personal dreams nor expressions of anything like a collective unconsciousness. Still they can structure elemental thinking when they come to be shared by more than one person, so that they can be reasoned and debated about.

The elemental lends itself to philosophical thought as an underworld that thought cannot encounter directly, but that requires detours through a specific kind of unthinking. *Unthinking* originally translates the French *dépenser*, which evokes three different gestures of thinking: *dé-penser*, or unthinking in the sense of not thinking; *déconstruire*, or deconstructing existent discourses; and *dépenser*, or lavishing

images of the unthought. “Unthinking the underworld” combines these three gestures.

Firstly, thinking the elemental is unthinking as *not thinking* – because the elemental is a nothingness where there is nothing to be thought. There is nothing present-at-hand that ordinary wordly thinking could point to and seize. Thinking about such a nothingness demands an undoing of ordinary ways of thinking. However, it does not mean ceasing thought altogether and annulling consciousness. It means changing attitude, as suggested by the images of descending to the Platonic cave or to the underworld of the dead, only this time the attitude should be changed from ordinary thinking into the greater abstraction of a transcendental act. It is a kind of *suspension* of thinking while still thinking, an *epoché*, not the *epoché* described by Husserl that reveals the structures of the thinking consciousness to itself, but another *epoché* that reveals the elemental structures of the world.

Secondly, thinking the elemental is unthinking in the sense of *deconstructing* given figures of thought. Of course, whatever occurs in the world can be *perceived* as a surprise, by somebody. However, in a stronger sense of the word events come forth as surprises when an entire (scientific) community tries to account for them, fails, and thus sees that its established ways of accounting for the world's events are insufficient. Surprise comes forth as contingency when the community tries to account for its necessity or at least possibility, fails, and thus realizes that the existent ways of explaining are insufficient. This is how the events themselves “deconstruct” the laws of the ordinary world. They are the apparitions of natural catastrophes in ecosystems that cannot account for them, or apparitions of specters in the world of the living that have no place for them.

Thirdly, thinking the elemental is *dépenser l'élémentaire*. “Unthinking” is too negative a term for translating *dépenser*,

because it is really a question of *prodigally lavishing and spending the treasures of elemental imagination*. The images of the elemental cannot really be invented *by us*. They are already available, offered by the impersonal elemental imagination *in us*, like the images of raw nature and the dead were already available for us. What we can do is each time choosing the most telling of the available images, critically unthinking them, and gently elaborating them into materials of philosophical invention.

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